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NETWORKINGS

With the Frontier Growing Up, Pioneer Malamud Closes His 'Net Shop

By John Schwartz

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Check out one of my favorite haunts on the World Wide Web and you'll find a drawing of a cobweb—a "World Wide Cobweb," reads the clever label under the symbol. It's Carl Malamud's way of saying goodbye.

Malamud, 36, is closing up shop at the Internet Multicasting Service, a nonprofit enterprise he founded three years ago and ran out of offices at the National Press Club Building and above the Young Chow Chinese restaurant on Capitol Hill. The message accompanying the cobweb symbol explains that the information on this and other Malamud pages bearing the cobweb will no longer be updated, because "we finished our work and disbanded on April 1, 1996."

Malamud's operation had always seemed to be balanced precariously between changing the world and falling to pieces.

Ultimately, it did both. Malamud and a small staff constantly redefined for me, and for many others, just what this Internet thing can do. The Multicasting Service itself was one of the first sites to provide live "channels" of audio over the Internet. (He called it RT-FM, a sly reference to a ubiquitous and profane techie acronym that stands for "Read The," um, er, "Manual.")

Among its many offerings to those with the proper computer hardware and software were several hours of weekly programs produced by

Malamud, including a regular "Geek of the Week" interview feature, an audio feed from Monitor Radio and CBC News, speeches from the floor of Congress and performances from the Kennedy Center. He also pushed the limits of public access to government information by offering patent documents and filings with the Securities and Exchange Commission on-line for free. Private companies have long charged for making such information available electronically, but Malamud figured that it belonged to the taxpayers and we shouldn't have to pay for it.

Most amazingly, Malamud, Internet pioneer Vinton Cerf and others created the Internet 1996 World Exposition, a newfangled take on the classic idea of the World's Fair. Malamud said he logged nearly a quarter of a million miles in the air, bringing 50 countries on board as participants and raising some \$100 million in cash and in-kind contributions to make the mega-project work.

Today you can visit the Exposition on-line or at walk-in sites around the globe, and take virtual tours of the nations, visit technology exhibits and more.

Many of these achievements likely will stand for some time. The Exposition is self-sustaining. Malamud and Cerf realized their goal of creating through it a robust techno-infrastructure of high-speed, fiber-optic links that will survive their brainchild; its very existence moves Internet technology forward a notch.

The University of Virginia has agreed to take over Malamud's accumulated Web pages. You'll still be able to send letters to Santa at the

PLACES TO GO

You can visit the Internet 1996 World Exposition at <http://park.org/>. To see what's left of the Internet Multicasting Service and other Malamud sites, aim your browser at <http://www.town.hall.org>. And if you're in a Christmas mood, Santa's still awaiting your letters at <http://www.town.hall.org/santa>. ■

"North Pole" Web site. "It's hard to tell we've pulled the plug," Malamud said last week.

"I don't want people to think the fair has gone away because it hasn't," Malamud said. "IMS has vaporized a little bit, but we were sort of vapor, anyway," he added with a tired chuckle.

Why quit? When Malamud called in March to tell me the curtain was coming down, he explained that his organization was "out of money, basically," and he could no longer stomach keeping the ambitious enterprise afloat on his credit cards. Of course, he had raised some \$3 million in private and public money to get IMS off the ground in the first place, so you get the feeling he could raise more.

On another level, it comes down to personality: Malamud is more of a creator than a maintainer. Sifting through 500 messages a day and dealing all the problems of a going concern isn't

nearly as much fun as coming up with a wild idea and seeing it make its debut. "I'm an architect," he says. But he was a frontier architect, designing the edifice and taking a hand in raising it too.

Which brings us to the other, more important reason he wants to quit: The Internet has been catching up with him. Those frontier towns are becoming modern cities—and fast.

"Now there are craftsmen out there who know their tools much better than I do," Malamud says. Internet "radio stations" abound, and other ideas Malamud pioneered have become commonplace as well. The SEC now distributes much of its information free over the Net, in no small part because of Malamud's carping and harping. The Internet, he says, "has grown up and gone mainstream, which is good."

So he's taking a two-year appointment as a visiting scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab, going off to recharge his batteries and to find the future again. He has rented famed physicist Enrico Fermi's old house—sort of a return to Malamud's roots, as his physicist father raised Carl around the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory outside Chicago. He is already planning new mischief: "Fermi's refrigerator is in the basement—let's see if we can hack that, get it on-line somehow."

Take care, Carl. Thanks for all the cool stuff you showed us. I'm sure we'll be hearing from you again. ■

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